

THE MEASURE OF LOVE LOST: JEANETTE WINTERSON'S "WRITTEN ON THE
BODY" AND THE DISCOURSES OF LOVE, MELANCHOLY, AND DISEASE

A Thesis

by

STEPHANIE K. WHEELER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2010

Major Subject: English

The Measure of Love Lost: Jeanette Winterson's "Written on the Body" and the
Discourses of Love, Melancholy, and Disease
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ABSTRACT

The Measure of Love Lost: Jeanette Winterson's "Written on the Body" and the
Discourses of Love, Melancholy, and Disease. (August 2010)

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Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* asks what it means to express love not through language but through the body, where it is felt, challenging the boundaries placed between body and language. Using Winterson's novel and Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* as points of inquiry, this thesis examines conceptions of love based on heteronormative and romanticized visions of present and healthy bodies. This thesis asks how a body that is diseased and dying can express an emotion that is predicated on these very notions of presence, absence, and health.

The narrator of the novel sees love as a scripted story that, once adhered to, determines the (successful) experience of love. Louise's cancer threatens these scripts of love, as it destroys the narrator's conception of both love and Louise. Despite the fact that Louise is absent and dying, the narrator begins to write a new story that will allow him/her to have a perfect relationship with Louise, so that s/he can reconcile the contradictions of the scripts that the relationship exposed. Using Slavoj Žižek's "Melancholy and the Act" and Richard Stamelman's *Lost Beyond Telling* as frameworks of mourning and melancholy, the narrator's melancholy over a lost presence thus

emerges as a way that allows him/her to create a perfect love story. To make Louise appear perfect in this perfect love story, the narrator manipulates the language of disease that reconstructs Louise's physical absence as a textual presence. The discourse surrounding Louise thus begins to operate out of the desire to compensate and supplement what is missing; in Louise's case, the narrator is supplementing her with a "normal," healthy body.

Looking in the shadows of the narrator's memories, *Written on the Body* emerges as not only an account of the narrator's love story, but also an account of Louise's story, a story of a body that refuses to be written on and demands to be heard. Winterson demonstrates how the body is always in the process of creating knowledge and meaning that can only be obtained by questioning what is normal, both for the body and for the scripts we all adhere to.

To my grandparents and my sister, because I'm always writing about you

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INTRODUCTION

Despite its ubiquitous use and appropriation in everyday use, the language of love is a discourse that resists definition and understanding. Part of this is due to the chaos of the emotion and the consequences of expressing it: what feels unique proves to be ordinary once articulated. Love insists on expression, but the language of love, constituted by clichés and quotes, renders the unique emotion of love as ordinary. The feeling of love becomes trivialized because the mode of expression removes the subjectivity behind a very personal emotion. Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*¹ asks what it means to express love not through language but through the body, where it is felt, challenging the boundaries placed between body and language.

Using Winterson's novel and Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* as points of inquiry, this thesis takes Winterson's suggestion one step further and examines conceptions of love based on heteronormative and romanticized visions of present and healthy bodies. This thesis asks how a body that is diseased and dying can express an emotion that is predicated on these very notions of presence, absence, and health.

This thesis follows the style of the *MLA Style Manual*.

¹A brief plot summary of Winterson's novel may be of assistance to those unfamiliar with it: Winterson's unnamed and ambiguously gendered narrator meets and falls in love with Louise, a married woman. Each leaves their significant other – the narrator leaves Jacqueline, a zookeeper, and Louise leaves Elgin, a doctor – and they begin their lives together. Shortly thereafter, Elgin meets with the narrator and reveals that Louise is dying of terminal cancer. As a doctor, he can guarantee Louise access to the best medical care available, but will only provide it if the narrator leaves Louise. Despite Louise's lack of faith in Elgin's medical opinion, the narrator leaves her with the belief that s/he is saving Louise's life.

The narrator of the novel relies on the heteronormative and romanticized versions of the body and love to guide him/her through all of his/her relationships. For the narrator, love is a scripted story that, once adhered to, determines the (successful) experience of love. Louise's cancer threatens these scripts of love, as it destroys the narrator's conception of both love and Louise. It breaks down the boundaries of presence, absence, and health, challenging the narrator to reevaluate who s/he is, what s/he wants, and what these stories do for him/her.

To reconcile the contradictions of the scripts that the narrator's relationship with Louise exposed, s/he begins to write a new story, one that will allow him/her to have a perfect relationship with Louise, despite the fact that Louise is absent and dying. Weaving together the discourses of love, melancholy, and disease, the narrator predicates love on absence and loss, and designates Louise's body as the site upon which this new language of love is written. This writing on the body allows the narrator to recreate Louise's presence, albeit a presence that is dependent on Louise's physical absence. Writing a new story thus allows the narrator to possess Louise through language, which simultaneously erases Louise's physical presence, creates a new presence, and follows the scripts that provoked this rewriting.

The narrator must recreate Louise's presence in order to rewrite the scripts because Louise is physically absent. Mourning the loss of his/her lover, the narrator's language makes evident that the loss of Louise stands in for something that never existed, was never actually owned. As such, his/her sorrow draws on the discourses of melancholy: the narrator mourns a loss of something that only existed in his/her mind.

Using Slavoj Žižek's "Melancholy and the Act" and Richard Stamelman's *Lost Beyond Telling* as frameworks of mourning and melancholy, the narrator's melancholy over a lost presence thus emerges as a way that allows him/her to create a perfect love story. Most importantly, Louise appears as perfect and absolute, which makes the love story the narrator creates perfect as well.

The narrator's melancholy is also an act of creation: Louise was ill throughout their entire acquaintance, so the healthy body that the narrator imagines restoring to her through acts of self-sacrifice is an imagined body, one that the narrator created. To make Louise appear perfect, the narrator manipulates the language of disease that refigures Louise's absence as a textual presence. The discourse surrounding Louise thus begins to operate out of the desire to compensate and supplement what is missing; in Louise's case, the narrator is supplementing her with a "normal," healthy body. The discourse of disease fills in what is absent or what has been lost due to Louise's disease.

The interconnectivity between the discourses of love, melancholy, and disease are revealed in the narrator's attempt to construct the absence of Louise. This interconnectivity is reflected in the presentation of this thesis. This thesis is modeled on Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, both in form and in critical approach. Barthes's form provides a way to express the interconnectivity between ideas in a circular, layered format. All of the discourses the narrator employs are connected, and the analysis of each reflects this. The format also reflects what Winterson calls writing on the body in the novel: "Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there" (89). The accumulations of fragments

presented vary depending on perspective – some meanings may only emerge under “certain lights.”

This notion of seeing things under certain lights is central to the argument this thesis makes about bodies. The collapse of the boundaries between these discourses allow a different perspective to emerge, one that illustrates the dissolved boundaries between absence and presence, health and disease, body and language. The illusions of power that drive the narrator to recreate Louise to fit his/her image of her also dissolve once the reader steps out of the perspective of the narrator. Looking in the shadows of the narrator’s memories, *Written on the Body* emerges as not only an account of the narrator’s love story, but also an account of Louise’s story, a story of a body that refuses to be written on and demands to be heard. Presenting Louise’s body as a space taken over by the narrator’s language, Winterson demonstrates how the body is always in the process of creating knowledge and meaning, a knowledge and meaning that can only be obtained by questioning what is normal, both for the body and for the scripts we all adhere to.

ABSENCE

The narrator defines absence as the taking away of agency. If the narrator can remove the body's tendency to change on its own, then the narrator can prevent it from decaying and leaving him/her forever. The narrator believes that constructing Louise's absence is achieved by taking away her agency. In effect, the narrator is establishing a binary: either Louise is here and she has agency, or Louise is gone and has no agency. The narrator relies on language to create and sustain this illusion. The discourses of love, melancholy, and disease all help the narrator maintain distance between him/her and Louise's dying body. This distance delays the interval between absence and death, thus placing Louise in a state of perpetual life or presence in the narrator's mind.

To keep Louise at a distance is to maintain an image of Louise that exists only for him/her. The narrator needs Louise to exist in a subjective way in order to "keep" her. To have Louise physically present is to be constantly threatened by her deteriorating body. Thus the narrator orchestrates an absence that will allow him/her to have Louise without the fear of losing her. As long as the narrator never sees Louise die, then there is a chance that Louise is always alive. The finality of death is what keeps the narrator running away from Louise.

See Also: Body, Closer, Death, Figuration, Gone, Hair, Loss, Melancholy,

Presence, Void

ANAMORPHIC

Slavoj Zizek uses anamorphosis to define melancholy, writing that melancholy is the mistake of perceiving something that is lacking as a loss (659). In any representation of grief, the object is altered and elevated into the absolute, rendering it anamorphic, that is, only perceivable when looked at askew – otherwise, it appears ordinary. Almost immediately after meeting Louise, the narrator created an idealized image of her that elevated her into the absolute, and the narrator clings to this image after discovering that Louise has cancer. This image is anamorphic because Louise's presence is invisible on the level of what the narrator is writing about her, but the narrator's dependency on the discourse of love in his/her grief provides a lens that allows Louise's presence to be seen.

See Also: Before, Body, Closer, Story, Fails, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Health, Herself, Loss, Love, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Other, Past, Possession, Protection, Rewrite, Simulation, Story, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write, Exes, You, Zoo

BEFORE

The narrator wants to recapture the image s/he had of Louise before her cancer was revealed. Because Louise was ill during their entire acquaintance, the healthy Louise that the narrator consistently refers to is entirely of his/her own creation. The narrator is very aware of the distinction made between the past, when s/he believed Louise to be healthy and the present, where Louise is dying:

You were milk-white and fresh to drink. Will your skin discolour, its brightness blurring? Will your neck and spleen distend? Will the rigorous contours of your stomach swell under an infertile load? It may be so and the private drawing I keep of you will be a poor reproduction then. It may be so but if you are broken then so am I. (125)

The narrator acknowledges that the portrait that s/he is painting of Louise is inaccurate because Louise was always sick. The narrator's musings on what will happen to Louise's body only serve to emphasize the narrator's reliance on the "poor reproduction" that s/he created. Despite this acknowledgement, the narrator will continue to rely on the idealized, healthy body that never existed in an effort to avoid the loss of Louise's real body. The narrator is clinging to the idealized image of Louise that existed in the moments before s/he learned of Louise's illness.

See Also: Anamorphic, Body, Closer, Story, Fails, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Health, Herself, Kill, Loss, Love, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Other, Past, Possession, Protection, Rewrite,

Simulation, Story, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write,
Exes, You, Zoo

BEGINNING

Barthes writes that the completion of the love story is dependent on the other; the lover only writes the beginning. “How does a love affair end? Then does it end?...I myself cannot (as an enamored subject) construct my love story to the end: I am its poet (it’s bard) only for the beginning; the end, like my own death, belongs to others” (101). Louise forces the narrator to relinquish control of their love story by putting him/her in situations that are out of his/her control. The narrator writes, “I was hopelessly in love with Louise and very scared...I thought of her as intense and beyond common sense. I never knew what she would do next...I still wanted her to be the leader of our expedition...I don’t want to be fated, I want to choose” (91). Unfamiliar with being out of control, the narrator is terrified of his/her relationship with Louise because s/he does not know what to expect or how to react. S/he does not have the script to this story, and it terrifies him/her. The love story is always written by the other, not the lover. The lover only writes the beginning. The narrator’s preoccupation with Louise using the “wrong script” demonstrates this idea: although the narrator did not write the script, s/he depends on it to provide the outline for the story s/he is participating in. But Louise’s movement away from the familiar story that the narrator expected demonstrates Barthes’ argument that the other – in this case, Louise – always writes the end of the lover’s love story.

See Also: Control, Comfort, Ending, Gone, Inadequate, Jacqueline, Narrator, Past, Rewrite, Scripts, Story, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Write, You

BODY

There are moments when the narrator writes about Louise's body directly, that is, separate from any filter or medium. The description of Louise's physical body, often appearing when the narrator writes about them making love, Louise's body is only described in terms of how the narrator's body is reacting to Louise's body. In other words, Louise's body operates at times as a way for the narrator to feel his/her own body. Her body is described in very sexualized terms in the context of lovemaking. For example:

We lay down together and I followed the bow of her lips with my finger....Her mouth contradicted her nose, not because it wasn't serious, but because it was sensual. It was full, lascivious in its depth, with a touch of cruelty. The nose and the mouth working together produced an odd effect of ascetic sexuality. There was discernment as well as desire in the picture. She was a Roman Cardinal, chaste, but for the perfect choirboy.

(67)

The words *sensual*, *lascivious*, *sexuality* and *desire* all describe Louise as very sexual and very desirable. But the words *contradicted*, *serious*, *cruelty* and *ascetic* positions her as unapproachable. The narrator's language is suggesting that Louise's body is something to be objectified and desired, but something to be feared as well.

For the narrator, the body serves as a replacement for Louise: all of the narrator's love is expressed through his/her admiration and preoccupation with Louise's body: the reader learns little about Louise outside of physical description. For example, from their initial meeting, the narrator can only speak of Louise in terms of her body. Describing Louise to a friend, the narrator says "Louise, dipterous girl born in flames, 35. 34 22 36. 10 years married. 5 months with me...1 miscarriage (or 2?) 0 children. 2 arms, 2 legs, too many white T-cells. 97 months to live" (144). The narrator can only provide facts, notably related to Louise's body. In this description of Louise, the very first thing that is alluded to is Louise's hair color – "born in flames" through numbers. Her body is 35 years old, measures 34 22 36, and has borne no children. A sense of normalcy is established by the fact that she has two arms and two legs, but it is quickly overshadowed by the overabundance of white T-cells and the number of months to live. The narrator's choice in describing Louise's body in this way suggests that the narrator's love for Louise was always through her body. When Louise is physically absent, it is Louise's body that the narrator wants to represent and recreate. Knowing that Louise's body cannot be physically present, the narrator must represent, through writing, the body that s/he thought existed in the past. Representation increases the distance between the present and the moment of absence, thus as long as Louise's healthy body exists in the narrator's mind, the narrator does not have to recognize that Louise is truly absent.

Louise's physical absence is essential to the narrator because s/he can maintain an image of Louise even while Louise is present, but because of the constant threat of Louise's changing, sick body, the narrator has to separate him/herself from it. Thus it is

actually Louise's body that becomes so important to the narrator, not Louise herself. The narrator's discourse of absence is two-fold: desire and need (16). Barthes writes that the desire for the lover to exist in a specific, subjective way is dependent on the other's absence. The need for the other's absence is thus rooted in the desire to keep the other at a distance (53).

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Closer, Death, Fails, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Hair, Health, Herself, Jacqueline, Kill, Lose, Love, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrate, Narrator, Obscure, Other, Past, Possession, Protection, Rewrite, Scripts, Simulation, Storytelling, T-Cells, Void, Write

CLOSER

From the narrator's perspective, writing is what maintains the distance between him/her and Louise. Yet as De Certeau writes, writing "is not only based upon the approach of a Word that is always lacking; it also postulates a preexisting other who is missing in the text, but authorizes it. The text is produced in relation to this missed present, this speaking, hearing other" (79). Thus the narrator's dependence on writing to distance him/herself from Louise only brings Louise closer to him/her. Because representation depends on absence, the physical distance between the narrator and Louise increases through writing, but the Louise that is absent is not the same Louise that the narrator wants. Writing absents Louise because it is predicated on her physical absence – the narrator must represent her because she is not there. This physical presence that is distanced through writing is Louise's body and her subjectivity. Yet what the narrator wants is not Louise's body and her subjectivity. De Certeau writes that "by 'forgetting' them and holding them at a distance, the text changes their status" (74). The narrator wants his/her own Louise, that is, the image of Louise that s/he created. This image of Louise is disconnected from her body and subjectivity, therefore writing only emphasizes the separation between Louise and the image of Louise: writing distances the body and brings the image closer, which is exactly what the narrator wants. Thus writing serves a purpose for the narrator, but this purpose is not exactly how s/he perceives it.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Body, Fails, Fidelity, Ghost, Loss,
Mastery, Melancholy, Obscure, Other, Past, Possession, Presence,
Protection, Simulation, Storytelling

COMFORT

Barthes writes that the “love story” that everyone aspires to be a part of is a story of accomplishment: “As Narrative...love is a story which is accomplished, in the sacred sense of the word: it is a *program* which must be completed” (93). The narrator holds a similar view of love, seeing it as a role that s/he must step into for the sake of being recognized as a lover. Thus the narrator longs for the script filled with clichés, because then s/he knows exactly what will happen and what role s/he is expected to play. The narrator’s refrain, “What’s wrong with that?” suggests the dependency on these scripts for the sake of comfort, asking the reader why comfort and familiarity in love is pushed aside in favor of newness and excitement. The scripts provide comfort because they are familiar. The narrator is comfortable knowing that s/he does not need to love Jacqueline as long as the scripts are available and s/he knows how to act. The narrator equates the emotions of falling in love with walking the plank, that is, walking into a situation where s/he does not know exactly what will happen. In other words, without the emotional connection to Jacqueline, the narrator is better able to see his/her role in the relationship and can act according to what has already been scripted out for him/her.

See Also: Beginning, Jacqueline, Past, Presence, Scripts

CONTROL

According the narrator, the love story was written before s/he entered into the relationship with Louise. Louise's refusal to engage in the scripts that the narrator depended on leaves the narrator feeling bewildered and unsure of his/her feelings. Louise continuously challenges the narrator's dependency on these scripts, forcing the narrator to reconsider his/her relationship with them:

'Louise, I love you.'

Very gently, she put her hand over my mouth and shook her head.

'Don't say that now. Don't say it yet. You might not mean it.' (...)

I was angry and bewildered. 'Louise, I don't know what you are. I've turned myself inside out to try and avoid what happened today. You affect me in ways I can't quantify or contain. All I can measure is the effect, and the effect is that I am out of control.'

'So you try and regain control by telling me you love me. That's a territory you know, isn't it? That's romance and courtship and whirlwind.'

'I don't want control.'

'I don't believe you.'

No and you're right not to believe me. If in doubt be sincere. That's a pretty little trick of mine. (...)

I knelt on the floor and clasped her legs against my chest.

‘Tell me what you want and I’ll do it.’

She stroked my hair. ‘I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them. Forget that you’ve been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new. Never say you love me until that day when you have proved it.’

‘How shall I prove it?’

‘I can’t tell you what to do.’ (52-54).

The narrator tells Louise that s/he loves her because that is what the narrator believes that the script is telling him/her to do. Louise recognizes this, however, and challenges the narrator to step away from the script, leaving the narrator feeling bewildered and unsure of how to act next. When the narrator has a script to adhere to, s/he is in control. Refusing to participate in this script, Louise renders the narrator out of control and grasping for any semblance of the script that s/he has left: “If in doubt be sincere. That’s a pretty little trick of mine.” Having submitted to the lack of control, the narrator asks Louise what to do next, only to be told that there is no script to follow, that the narrator will have to act on his/her own, away from any script.

See Also: Beginning, Comfort, Death, Ending, Ghost, Health, Mastery, Obscure, Possession, Presence, Protection, Rewrite, Story, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten

DEATH

Barthes writes that constructing an absence is delaying death (16). Louise's imminent death from terminal cancer drives the narrator to construct an absence and thereby simulate death. If death is only simulated, then the narrator will never have to experience Louise's real death. The narrator writes, "I had been reading books that dealt with death partly because my separation from Louise was final and partly because I knew she would die and that I would have to cope with this second loss, perhaps just as the first was less inflamed. I wanted to cope" (154). Considering Louise as already dead will assuage the pain of Louise's real death when it comes; what the narrator is doing with this simulated death is delaying Louise's real death. In delaying it, the narrator will have time to heal and prepare for Louise's death, but always with the knowledge that Louise may still be alive. The pain that the narrator feels at Louise's simulated death is what Barthes refers to as the lover's anxiety: a fear of mourning an absence that has already occurred. The lover desires what is absent and what therefore cannot hurt. Yet in what Barthes calls this "amorous mourning," the other is neither dead nor gone: it is the lover who orchestrates the absence of the other in order to control what the other means. As is, the other cannot receive meaning until the lover assigns it, therefore the other can only exist in the lover's truth.

See Also: Absence, Before, Body, Comfort, Ending, Health, Inadequate, Loss,
Love, Possession, Presence, Void

ENDING

Barthes writes that the love story that the lover is acting out has already occurred because of the existence of scripts: "...this story has *already taken place*: for what is event is exclusively the delight of which I have been the object and whose aftereffects I repeat (and fail to achieve) (93-94). In other words, the story that lovers are acting out is always the same one, each time coming to the same conclusion. The reason that these stories are entered into so many times is in the hope that the story will end differently.

The narrator does indeed believe that love is a program, but one that can only be completed in one way: failure. When Louise deviates from the script, the narrator does not know how to respond:

You said, 'I'm going to leave.'

I thought, Yes, of course you are, you're going back to the shell.

I'm an idiot. I've done it again and I said I'd never do it again.

You said, 'I told him before we came away. I've told him I won't change my mind even if you change yours.'

This is the wrong script. This is the moment where I'm supposed to be self-righteous and angry. This is the moment where you're supposed to flood with tears and tell me how hard it is to say these things and what can you do and will I hate you and yes you know I'll hate you and there are no question marks in this speech because it's a fair accompli. (...)

You said, 'I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie.' (18-19)

Prepared to accept the usual turn of events in his/her love story, Louise's sudden movement away from the script alarms the narrator. For the narrator, love affairs have only one ending, and as Louise alludes to, anything apart from this ending is a lie.

See Also: Beginning, Control, Death, Gone, Kill, Loss, Narrator, Past, Possession, Quit, Rewrite, Scripts, Story, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Write

FAILS

Stamelman writes that representation always fails because it leaves only traces of the absent thing (12). Whatever is created from the loss of an absent person is never the absent person because of the lack of subjectivity. What exists is only a trace. While the narrator may never reproduce Louise's subjectivity, s/he may produce a substitute constituted by the trace left by Louise. As noted above, what the narrator wants is not Louise's physical body because that physical body is always in a state of change: "Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem" (119). Once Louise's physical body is gone, the narrator relies on the trace – the memories of Louise's body – left behind from this loss. By taking elements of Louise that remain with the narrator after s/he leaves, the narrator reconstructs a version of Louise that will not develop and change.

In lamenting the loss of Louise's physical body, the narrator becomes melancholic for what s/he believed was a perfect, unchanging and healthy body. Because Louise's illness is what drove the narrator away, if her body can exist again without this illness, then the threat of losing Louise is gone. The trace allows Louise's body to be present and healthy. In this way, the presence of Louise is only a trace, yet the trace is all that the narrator wants.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Figuration, Inadequate, Loss,
Lose, Protection, Rewrite, Void

FIDELITY

In holding on to the idealized image of Louise, the narrator is holding on to his/her love for Louise. David T. Mitchell writes "images of sick bodies gives all bodies a tangible essence, in that the healthy corporeal surface fails to achieve its symbolic effect without its disabled counterpart" (28). The fact that the narrator's perception of Louise is imaginary and idealized deems the romance between him/her and Louise successful. Yet this image of Louise's body that the narrator holds on to is not what keeps his/her feelings unchanged: it is, ironically, the sick, dying body that allows the narrator to continue loving Louise. Acknowledging the corporeality of Louise's body and the consequences of the cancer, the narrator knows that if s/he wants to keep Louise close, then s/he must love her in terms that are not linked to the corporeal body. The narrator wants to "recognize [Louise] even when her body had long since fallen away." Once the narrator is aware of the body's vulnerability, s/he can appreciate the unchanging and infallible image of Louise of his/her own creation.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Gone, Health, Herself, Lose, Love, Melancholy, Obscure, Other, Past, Possession, Presence, Protection, Storytelling, T-Cells

FIGURATION

Experiences that are written about are subject to distancing, thus to write about an experience is to lose it. The act of writing makes an experience disappear because in writing, the author is reconstructing the experience in the framework that is dependent on loss. Even when the narrator is recounting moments that s/he was physically with Louise, it is only described in terms of Louise's impending absence: "I held her to me though time had stripped away the tones and textures of her skin. I could have held her for a thousand years until the skeleton itself had rubbed away to dust" (51). Louise's presence is marked by her physicality – the narrator is holding her – and her absence is marked by the deteriorating body. This image of the narrator holding Louise until she deteriorates is appropriate because the narrator continues to hold on to a body that is no longer there. Yet the experience of holding and touching Louise cannot ever be anything other than lost, simply because it exists in the framework of loss and deterioration. Taken in this framework, writing names either what is absent or is in the process of becoming absent. Figuration of loss is itself loss.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic Before, Body, Closer, Fails, Ghost, Health, Herself, Inadequate, Kill, Loss, Lose, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Past, Possession, Presence, Protection, Rewrite, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Write, You

GHOST

The narrator chooses to write about Louise because s/he wants to lose Louise and distance him/herself from her. When this distancing occurs, the narrator loses the Louise that is subject to her disease. His/her experiences with Louise become fictions because in the act of writing about them, they become lost. What takes their place are inventions:

Louise wasn't dying, she was safe in Switzerland. She was standing in a long green skirt by the drop of a torrent. The waterfall ran down from her hair over her breasts, her skirt was transparent. I looked more closely. Her body was transparent. I saw the course of her blood, the ventricles of her heart, her legs' long bones like tusks. Her blood was clean and red like summer roses. She was fragrant and in bud. No drought. No pain. If

Louise is well then I am well. (154)

This invention of Louise is exactly what the narrator wants. The description of Louise's healthy body is central to this invention. Louise's body is transparent enough for the narrator to see Louise's heart, her bones, and most importantly, her clean, no longer diseased blood. This image of the body tells the narrator that Louise is in no pain. What is suggested here is that in his/her fantasy, the narrator is able to determine Louise's health only by looking through her, as if looking at a ghost. Writing about Louise's diseased body separates the narrator from it, but the narrator's desire for Louise's perfect body solidifies her presence in the narrator's life. With each attempt to escape Louise, the narrator makes her more present in his/her life, albeit through a substitution.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Control, Figuration, Hair, Health,
Lose, Obscure, Other, Past, Presence, Protection, Rewrite,
Simulation, Storytelling, T-Cells, Exes, Zoo

GONE

In order to maintain the illusion that what is possessed is actually lost, Žižek writes that “one of the elements of reality has to be displaced and occupy the central void” (662). A part of reality must be replaced with the illusion that the object is lost. This illusion helps to create a reality where the object cannot be affected by temporality. The narrator relies on the idealized image of Louise to sustain the illusion that she is both gone and in possession of the narrator. The narrator refigures reality in such a way that feeds into the alternate reality of Louise’s death but also Louise’s presence.

The narrator needs to be constantly reminded of his/her separation from Louise so that s/he can maintain the image of her: Louise’s physical absence is essential for the narrator to act out what s/he believes is expected while simultaneously acting out what s/he believes is needed. The narrator writes “I call Louise from the doorstep because I know she can’t hear me” (135). By calling out to Louise, the narrator does what s/he believes is scripted for someone in this situation, but does so within his/her own terms. The love story tells the narrator that s/he must make an attempt to be with Louise again, therefore the narrator follows this, yet does so in a way that will never threaten his/her absence from Louise. The narrator calls Louise from the doorstep because it offers the illusion of an active attempt to bring Louise back, but one that will always fail. Louise cannot hear the narrator calling out to her, which is exactly the simulation that the narrator needs: to regain Louise’s physical presence is to quickly lose it again in death.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Death, Ending, Herself,
Kill, Loss, Love, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Possession,
Presence, Protector, Rewrite, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten,
Zoo

HAIR

What motivates the narrator to stage Louise's absence is his/her preoccupation and obsession with Louise's body. From their earliest meeting, the narrator could only think of Louise in terms of her body. The narrator's first description of Louise is a reflection on how Louise could be refigured or redrawn to fit the narrator's own scripts:

If I were painting Louise I'd paint her as a swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light. There are plenty of legends about women turning into trees but are there any about trees turning into women? Well she does, it's the way her hair fills with wind and sweeps out around her head. Very often I expect her to rustle. She doesn't rustle but her flesh has the moonlit shade of a silver birch. (28-29)

In this initial description of Louise, the narrator recreates her as someone who is imaginary and impossible, but simultaneously accessible to the narrator. The narrator is able to see Louise in nature – the trees, the wind, the moonlight – but does not see nature in Louise. From the earliest encounter, then, the narrator has begun to establish an ideal of Louise that is both impossible and accessible.

See Also: Absence, Body, Ghost, Health, Herself, Narrator, Obscure, Past,

Presence, Protection, Sex, Simulation, Storytelling, T-Cells, Write

HEALTH

The narrator must write to obscure Louise's diseased body so that s/he can indulge in the image of Louise's body as both healthy and unchanging body. To do this, the narrator tells stories about Louise as both present and healthy. For example, when the narrator goes to sleep, s/he fantasizes about sleeping next to her and touching her body:

Sleeping beside Louise had been a pleasure that often lead to sex but which was separate from it...Her smell. Specific Louise smell. Her hair. A red blanket to cover us both. Her legs....pushing my foot down her shin-bone, the long bones of her legs rich in marrow. Marrow where the blood cells are formed red and white. Red and white, the colours of Louise.

(110)

The narrator describes Louise's legs in a more scientific discourse, focusing on the marrow of the bones and the blood cells. As Louise is dying of leukemia, the part of the body that the narrator spends the most time focusing on in his/her description is Louise's blood. In this particular story, Louise's blood is clean and healthy. This is the Louise that the narrator wants: red and white, a perfect balance of beauty and health. Red hair, pale skin on the outside, red and white (clean) blood cells on the inside.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Control, Death, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Hair,

Kill, Lose, Narrator, Past, Possess, Protection, T-Cells

HERSELF

The narrator's vision of Louise depends on supplements: she is always only ever in seen in relation to nature, in food, or in art. The narrator never sees Louise as simply herself: Louise is whatever and wherever the narrator is or wants her to be. Because of this, the narrator is able to find and be with Louise everywhere. The price that is paid, though, is Louise herself. Only able to feel Louise's presence through its supplemental contexts, the narrator never truly allows him/herself to be with Louise. A distance is thus created very early on in their acquaintance, a distance that is never broken, but is also not recognized until much too late.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Fidelity Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Inadequate, Kill, Love, Quit, Rewrite, Simulation, Story, You

INADEQUATE

The lover's discourse quickly proves inadequate. The narrator quickly realizes the complications of the decision to leave Louise in the name of the love story: "There was only the weight of wrong-doing. I had failed Louise and it was too late. What right had I to decide how she should live? What right had I to decide how she should die?" (157). In attempting to regain control of the story, the narrator realizes the cost of doing so is Louise herself. What the narrator has done is decide exactly how Louise should live and exactly how Louise will die. The discourse has failed because, as Barthes writes, the lover's discourse is a system relying on demand and response. If Louise has been written out of the story, the narrator finds him/herself demanding something of someone who is not there. The only response that the narrator receives is a response of his/her own making.

See Also: Beginning, Death, Figuration, Herself, Presence, Quit, Rewrite,
Scripts, Write, Exes, Zoo

JACQUELINE

What the narrator wants in Jacqueline is a level of comfort that can only be achieved once love – or in the narrator’s case, desire – is removed. Because the narrator equates love with physical desire, maneuvering within these scripts is always predicated on the body. For example, in an attempt to act outside the scripts, the narrator initially tries to convince him/herself that s/he is happy with Jacqueline. To do this, the narrator removes Jacqueline’s body from the scripts in order to find comfort:

I considered her. I didn’t love her and I didn’t want to love her. I didn’t desire her and I could not imagine desiring her. These were all points in her favour. I had lately learned that another way of writing FALL IN LOVE is WALK THE PLANK. I was tired of balancing blindfold on a slender beam, one slip and into the unplumbed sea. I wanted the clichés, the armchair. I wanted the broad road and twenty-twenty vision. What’s wrong with that? It’s called growing up. Maybe most people gloss their comforts with a patina of romance but it soon wears off. They’re in it for the long haul; the expanding waistline and the little semi in the suburbs. What’s wrong with that? Late-night TV and snoring side by side into the millennium. Till death us do part. Anniversary darling? What’s wrong with that? (26)

The narrator does not love Jacqueline because the narrator does not desire her. The narrator wants a clear direction to follow without the complications of a physical

attachment to hinder his/her role as a lover. In this way, the narrator is removing Jacqueline's (undesirable) body from the script. Any emotion – real, or disguised as sexual attraction – would obscure the narrator's part in the love story. What the narrator seeks to achieve is not emotional attachment, but comfort. To achieve both would be to enter into the scripts that s/he is trying to avoid.

See Also: Beginning, Body, Comfort, Rewrite, Scripts, Sex, Unwritten, Exes

KILL

“I’m exhausted but I’m going to work. Lives depend on my work and because of you I shall not be at my best today. You might think of yourself as a murderer.”

“I might but I shan’t,” said Louise. (90)

Elgin, speaking to Louise, argues that because he is a doctor, when his body is not at its best, it puts other bodies in danger, which is why he calls Louise a murderer. For Elgin, the value of a body is dependent on its productivity: when it cannot perform what is expected of it, it is useless. In Elgin’s case, when he cannot perform his duties of a doctor, it will cost him a life. The narrator, similarly, believes that since Louise’s body is dying, s/he must figuratively kill it in order to reach its healthy counterpart. Otherwise, Louise’s body will only hamper what the narrator wants from it. Once the diseased body is gone, the narrator is able to create and maintain a healthy body for Louise in his/her mind, and this can only be done when Louise’s diseased body is gone.

Louise is the only one in the novel who does not hold this view. Although her body is succumbing to her disease, she does not allow herself to be defined by her cancer. When the narrator confronts her about it, her reply is that it since she is asymptomatic, her cancer is not serious (103). She does not feel limited or allow herself to be limited by her cancer: during her affair with the narrator, the narrator never identified her as anything but healthy.

See Also: Body, Figuration, Gone, Health, Herself, Loss, Past, Possession,
Protection, Write

LOSE

Writing can act as a surrogate for what is lost. Stamelman writes that the desire to overcome loss manifests itself in the attempt to name it or represent it. We strive to find “new forms that will allow us to retell, recall, remember, and resuscitate what is gone” (Stamelman 4). Memorials are created to serve this purpose, that is, to create a surrogate object to the loss. In doing so, both significance of what is absent and its loss are memorialized: they become the physical manifestation of loss. For the narrator, Louise’s dying body is a manifestation of a loss. This is not the loss of Louise, but of Louise’s healthy body. Perceiving Louise’s body as a site on which to write his/her idealization of Louise, the diseased body acts as a memorial of a loss of health. Louise’s dying body represents the loss itself, not the loss of Louise.

Stamelman writes that “writing is always the writing of loss” (17). In the act of writing, the object that is written about must be absent because representation is predicated on absence. In other words, something can only be represented in writing if it is gone. If it is not gone, then the act of writing absents it. Stamelman writes that to write about loss is to grant that what is absent cannot be captured again (xi). This is because writing becomes dependent on the structure of loss, therefore everything that is written within this framework depends on the loss that surrounds it.

Yet language negates its own power to repossess the meaning of absent things (38). Loss, reformed as language, also reaffirms and reminds the author that language is an ineffective form for loss to take. “In giving presence to images and metaphors,

language points to its own inadequacy at ever being able to express the void of absence. We are hounded by failure because we must always speak by analogy: that is, imprecisely, imperfectly, and indeterminately” (23). The narrator’s reliance on language to alienate the pain of losing Louise becomes futile: “Even here in this private place my syntax has fallen pretty to the deceit” (15). Writing becomes both a form of writing and a form of death. What is created is simply a representation of the absence itself and not what is absent, implicating language in loss (Stamelman 39). Writing to forget Louise only serves as a constant reminder of what Louise is no longer, and what she cannot become.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Closer, Death, Fails, Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Health, Kill, Love, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Other, Possession, Presence, Protection, Simulation, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write

LOVE

The narrator always regards his/her feelings for Louise in terms of Louise's body: for the narrator, expressing his/her love must always be done via Louise's body. For example, the first time that the narrator tells Louise that s/he loves her, it is after making love (53). Furthermore, the first time that the narrator examines his/her love for Louise, it is while s/he is touching Louise's body: "In silence and in darkness we loved each other and as I traced her bones with my palm I wondered what time would do to skin that was so new to me. Could I ever feel any less for this body? Why does ardour pass?" (89-90). The narrator does not ask him/herself if s/he could ever feel any less for Louise, but for Louise's body. By framing this question around the eminent changing of this body over time, the narrator is displaying an early desire for Louise's body to remain unchanged. The emotions that the narrator feels in the moment that s/he is touching Louise's body are emotions that the narrator is afraid of losing. Thus, the narrator wonders if s/he will have the same feelings for Louise after her body changes.

The novel's refrain, "why is the measure of love loss?" is answered in this recreation of Louise's body: for the narrator, love is fidelity to someone or something that will eventually leave or die. The narrator's relationship with Louise is perfect and successful, according to the scripts of love that s/he clings to. The narrator writes, "A friend of mine said before I left London, 'At least your relationship with Louise didn't fail. It was the perfect romance.' Was it? Is that what perfection costs?....The happy endings are compromises. Is that the choice?" (187). For the narrator, perfection is

indeed a compromise: Louise will be physically absent, but the narrator will be able to hold on to the image of Louise as long as s/he wishes.

See Also: Body, Fidelity, Gone, Herself, Lose, Melancholy, Sex, Exes

MASTERY

Barthes argues that writing about the other offers a way to assert mastery over the other and the desire for the other. “All I might produce, at best, is a writing of the Image-repertoire; and for that I would have to renounce the Image-repertoire of writing – would have to let myself be subjugated by my language” (98-99). Writing about the other will always leave a trace of the original, found in the body. The lover must obscure the body (or the original) and continue to engage in the illusion of the effects of language. Thus all that the lover can produce is a writing of the image, not the image itself. Writing is in the place where the lover is not.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Control, Figuration, Herself, Lose, Loss, Melancholy, Narrator, Possession, Presence, Protection, Rewrite, Scripts, Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write

MELANCHOLY

When the narrator discovers that Louise's body is ill, the narrator immediately leaves and begins to mourn the loss of Louise's body. What is significant is that the narrator is mourning the loss of the perfect, idealized body that the narrator created. The narrator wants this idealized body because it, in the narrator's mind, is one that can be controlled, protected, and refigured at the narrator's will. Since the narrator does not *need* Louise's physical body to feel her presence, the narrator is able to rely on contexts to recreate an image of it.

Melancholy is the mourning of the loss itself, not the lost person. The narrator demonstrates this in his/her obsession with the act of leaving Louise: "Run out on her? That doesn't sound like the heroics I'd had in mind. Hadn't I sacrificed myself for her? Offered my life for her life?...I had to leave. She would have died for my sake. Wasn't it better for me to live a half life for her sake?" (159). The narrator only sees Louise's absence as a consequence of his/her own actions, as opposed to seeing Louise's absence as a loss of physical presence. This is because, as Stamelman writes, in mourning loss, the mourner also recognizes the loss of the self (28). The narrator's grief over his/her actions makes him/her feel that s/he "was becoming less present every day" (188). The narrator's grief is manifesting itself in his/her body, writing that "to remember you it's my own body I touch" (129-30). Yet the narrator's own body is not the body of Louise that s/he wants, therefore in the act of distancing him/herself from Louise, the narrator is feeling his/her own self disappearing. Stamelman writes that grief offers a physical

surrogate to what has been lost: through grief, the mourner can create an image of what is lacking and an image of the recovered presence of who is lost (5). In this way, through the narrator's grief – manifested in the body – the narrator can create and supplement the image of Louise's diseased body, recovering the presence of the imaginary and idealized body.

The narrator's melancholy is marked by his/her misinterpretation of what is missing after s/he leaves Louise. Žižek defines melancholy as an attachment to a lost object and symbolizes the object rather than the loss. Mourning, alternatively, has attachment to the loss, not the lost object. Mourning exists because of a loss, melancholy exists because of a lack. This distinction is often obscured, as melancholy understands a lack as a loss, disguising the fact that the object was lacking from the beginning. The object was never lost because the object was never there. This is what makes the narrator's grief melancholic: the idealized image of Louise that s/he holds on to never existed.

See Also: Fidelity, Figuration, Gone, Lose, Loss, Love, Mastery, Past,
Possession, Storytelling, Write

NARRATOR

The sex of the narrator has proven to be the biggest mystery of the novel. But the ambiguity surrounding the narrator's sex is of little importance within the scope of the story. If the novel is about writing stories on the body – that is, if we are the stories we tell about ourselves – then this particular story, written by the narrator, is not bound to his/her sex. That this detail is missing from the novel is only a testament to the ways in which bodies are identified and classified through language.

The image of Louise's healthy body can only exist for the narrator in a story that s/he created once the story is situated outside of typical storytelling. Mitchell writes "whereas the able body has no definitional core (it poses as transparently average or normal), the disabled body surfaces as any body capable of being narrated as outside the norm" (17). For the narrator's story to be about Louise, it must either be a story about someone who is absent or a fantasy. But the narrator wants Louise to be neither: s/he wants a healthy Louise to be present. To do this, the narrator must create a new way to speak about Louise: she must learn how to narrate Louise outside the norm.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Body, Figuration, Gone, Hair,

Health, Lose, Loss, Mastery, Melancholy, Obscure, Other, Past,

Possession, Presence, Protect, Quit, Rewrite, Script, Story,

Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write, Exes, You, Zoo

OBSCURE

The narrator writes in order to obscure the body. It is Louise's body that is sick, therefore if the narrator can keep Louise alive without her body, then Louise can stay alive and present. Yet all that the narrator accomplishes is the creation of an image of Louise that only reflects the narrator and the narrator's wishes, not Louise herself. Because the narrator can only see Louise as something idealized, recreating a fabricated Louise is, for the narrator, recreating Louise.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Control, Fidelity, Figuration,

Ghost, Gone, Hair, Lose, Narrator, Past, Presence, Protection,

Rewrite, Simulation, Storytelling, T-Cells, Write

OTHER

In altering the love story or scripts of love, Barthes argues that the lover is also altering the image of the other (43). The lover sees the other as incomplete because of the lack of structure adhering to the love story, therefore the lover will insert what is missing. This is often a projection of the lover onto the other: the other is thus always a bit of the other and vice versa. Almost immediately after meeting Louise, the narrator has fantasies of being consumed by Louise. When Louise is ill, the narrator fantasizes about going inside Louise's body and doing for the body what it cannot do on its own, that is, protect Louise from the disease. In this way, the narrator has projected him/herself so much into Louise that the narrator feels the physical unity between the two. If the narrator can maintain this idea that s/he is still alive in Louise and vice versa, then Louise can stay alive and present.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Fidelity, Ghost, Lose, Narrator,
Protection, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void

PAST

The narrator wishes to recapture a part of the past by creating a representation of Louise, which can only exist once Louise is absent. This representation is one that is motivated entirely by the narrator's desire to remove the original experience of his/her loss of Louise. Stamelman writes that this attempt to regain presence removes the experience of loss because it denies reality. It is an act of forgetting (33). For the narrator, this version of Louise is safe and happy, albeit without him/her: "I preferred my other reality: Louise was safe somewhere, forgetting about Elgin and about me. Perhaps with somebody else. That was the part of the dream I tried to wake out of. None the less it was better than the pain of her death" (174). The representation of Louise in the narrator's alternate reality is one that separates her physical body from both the narrator and from death. As long as Louise exists as a representation of what the narrator wishes for her, she will be far from death.

See Also: Figuration, Ghost, Hair, Health, Kill, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Rewrite, Story, T-Cells

POSSESSION

The façade of a present object that was always absent allows one to indulge in the illusion of possession of the object. In its loss, the melancholic possesses the lost object unconditionally, if only in the imagination. To fully possess something that one never had, the melancholic creates the object of love as already lost, but always held present in the possession of memory. To reconcile this, the melancholic treats the object as if it is gone. The narrator sees Louise's body as lacking the capacity to fight off the cancer, and so the narrator attempts to possess Louise's body in order to provide what is missing. In order to do this, Louise must be absent, or her body must be unchanging. The narrator simulates Louise's death by leaving, thus convincing him/herself that Louise is indeed gone and not coming back, and as a result possessing in melancholia the unchanged object of desire: the figurative body of the beloved.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Control, Death, Ending, Fidelity, Figuration, Gone, Health, Kill, Lose, Loss, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Presence, Protection, T-Cells, Simulation, Void, Write, You

PRESENCE

To represent Louise's presence the way s/he wants to, the narrator must remove her physical presence. Through writing, an absence can exist in another form, one that appears to be more manageable. Stamelman argues: "Writing is an act of survivorship; it is what the survivor does in order to keep going, to understand what has happened in his or her life, and to give form, shape, and sound to the shape of losing" (19). Writing not only allows loss to appear more concrete and controllable, but loss allows writing to be more open to a variety of meanings. Freeing writing from a referent, loss opens language up to a variety of things equally able to stand in for one another (30). In this way, the absent object is endowed with meaning, but a meaning that only language can provide. Through writing, the narrator is able to keep Louise present: "I have to have this story. I told it to myself every day and I hold it against my chest every night. It is my comforter...She wasn't sick and deserted in some rented room with thin curtains. She was well. Louise was well" (174). In writing, the narrator believes that s/he can simultaneously distance and control Louise by attaching a new meaning to her absence: if Louise is absent, then she is well, and the narrator escapes the threat of a second loss, that of her death. Writing destroys to recreate what it is attempting to re-present.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Closer, Control, Comfort, Death,

Ending, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Inadequate, Lose,

Loss, Mastery, Narrator, Obscure, Possession, Protection,

Rewrite, Simulation, Story, Storytelling, Void, Write, You, Zoo

PROTECTION

Louise: “My child. My baby. The tender thing I wanted to protect.”

Language operates as a protection of the image. In writing about her, the narrator is putting Louise into an unchanging state that is dependent on language. Simply put, because the narrator is refiguring Louise into a form of discourse, Louise can be unchanging and malleable. Barthes writes that when the language protecting the idealized image of the other breaks down, the image breaks down as well (28). The narrator’s discourse protecting Louise’s body breaks down whenever the narrator writes about Louise’s cancer. The discourse protecting Louise excludes the language of Louise’s illness, therefore whenever the cancer is described, the protection that the narrator built up falls apart. Barthes writes that “certain parts of the body are particularly appropriate to this *observation*: eyelashes, nails, roots of the hair, the incomplete objects. It is obvious that I am then in the process of fetishizing a corpse...if it begins *doing something*, my desire changes” (71). The narrator’s discourse of love is also the language of mortality, killing the body to protect it, leaving the lover to protect the love affair.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Control, Fails, Fidelity, Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Health, Kill, Lose, Loss, Mastery, Narrator, Obscure, Possession, Presence, Script, Storytelling, T-Cells, Write

QUIT

The narrator frequently refers to the fact that most of his/her relationships do not last past six months; when the narrator leaves Louise, they had been together for five months. Louise's cancer gives the narrator the opportunity to quit the relationship before it ends badly. Louise's cancer also gives the narrator the opportunity to test his/her faith in the relationship and in Louise's judgment. Leaving her, then, suggests that the narrator is uncomfortable with the future of the relationship and the future of Louise's health. But the narrator sees his/her decision to leave Louise as a heroic decision, sacrificing her own happiness so that Louise may live. Not until the narrator's friend, Gail Right, tells her that s/he was wrong does the narrator realize that s/he had given up on Louise:

‘You shouldn’t have run out on her.’

Run out on her? That doesn’t sound like the heroics I’d had in mind. Hadn’t I sacrificed myself for her? Offered my life for her life?

‘She wasn’t a child.’

Yes she was. My child. My baby. The tender thing I wanted to protect.

‘You didn’t give her a chance to say what she wanted. You left.’

I had to leave. She would have died for my sake. Wasn’t it better for me to live half a life for her sake? (159).

The narrator assumes that quitting the love affair will save Louise's life. But what the narrator fails to acknowledge is that Louise will not go back to Elgin, therefore leaving her would mean leaving her to be alone. Louise explicitly tells the narrator that she does not trust Elgin's judgment as her doctor²: "I don't trust Elgin. I'm getting a second opinion" (103). The narrator does not have faith in Louise's own plans and gives up on them before she is able to try. Essentially what the narrator has done in his/her attempt to save Louise's life is give up on her, leaving her to deal with her disease all alone.

See Also: Ending, Herself, Inadequate, Narrator

² Elgin, the reader will recall, is an Oncologist, who agrees to treat Louise with his own experimental trial if the narrator leaves Louise.

REWRITE

One major threat that Louise poses to the narrator is the way in which she is able to translate the narrator for herself. The narrator writes “the pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. (...) I didn’t know Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (89). The narrator’s belief that Louise has translated him/her into her own book is suggestive of the ways in which Louise understands the narrator better than the narrator understands Louise. Louise is writing meaning onto the narrator’s body to understand it, yet the narrator cannot do the same for Louise’s body because it is ill. The narrator, who is a translator by trade, writes to create Louise as someone or something to be translated so that s/he can understand her. The narrator wants to rewrite Louise into his/her own language, hence the novel. The novel can be read as the narrator’s way of translating Louise just as Louise translated him/her.

Since the language of the scripts is what the narrator knows, leaving Louise is the only way to get back to language that s/he is familiar with. The narrator must write Louise into a story that s/he is already familiar with. But this attempt also costs the narrator Louise’s presence. The narrator muses that “it’s as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?” This question is followed by the response, “No, but you tried to...she wasn’t yours for the making” (189). To understand Louise, the narrator attempted to move Louise into a script that s/he knew. In the process, the narrator needed to change Louise to fit into this script, and these changes to Louise

created an idealized Louise, one that never existed. In many ways, then, the narrator did invent Louise. But as his/her friend correctly points out, the real, dying Louise, was never up for the making.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Body, Control, Ending, Fails,
Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Herself, Inadequate, Jacqueline,
Lose, Mastery, Narrator, Obscure, Presence, Scripts, Story,
Storytelling, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write, You, Zoo

SCRIPTS

The narrator sees love as a series of scripts that are followed but always achieve the same end: failure. When the narrator discovers that Louise is ill, the idealized body that s/he desires so much is not affected, but because of the narrator's reliance on the scripts of love, s/he uses Louise's cancer as an excuse to do what s/he thinks comes next. The scripts that the narrator has always followed all lead to the same ending. When this ending is not in sight while the narrator is seeing Louise, the narrator looks for ways to bring about this familiar and comfortable ending. Louise's cancer offers a way out of the unfamiliar turn of events, giving the narrator a reason to separate him/herself from Louise and end the love affair before it finishes in the same way, that is, as a failed relationship.

See Also: Beginning, Body, Comfort, Ending, Inadequate, Jacqueline, Mastery, Narrate, Protection, Rewrite, Sex, Storytelling, Unwritten, Void, Write, Exes, Zoo.

SEX

Before Louise, the narrator engaged in multiple sexual relationships and interpreted each sexual relationship as love, a mistake that s/he can only see in the act of looking back and remembering. The narrator's misinterpretation of love instead of sex is often based in the narrator's misinterpretation of the language of love:

The door was open. True, she didn't exactly open it herself. Her butler opened it for her. His name was Boredom. She said, 'Boredom, fetch me a plaything.' He said, 'Very good ma'am,' and putting on his white gloves so that the fingerprints would not show he tapped at my heart and I thought he said his name was Love. (15-16)

The narrator is misinterpreting his/her lover's motivation. That the narrator has the butler name himself in this analogy as "Boredom" suggests that although the narrator recognizes that s/he is only a "plaything," s/he convinces him/herself that the physical affair is an emotional one. This is demonstrative of the way that the narrator convinces him/herself that all of the sexual relationships s/he has been in were love relationships.

This is best illustrated in the way the narrator introduces each love affair with a description of the physical relationship. Ultimately, what the narrator considers love is always grounded in something physical. The narrator writes, "I've been through a lot of marriages. Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realize I was hearing the same story every time" (13). The only kind of love that the narrator engages in is physical relationships, evidenced in his/her statement that s/he had "been through a lot of

marriages.” The narrator is equating love with marriage, but then quickly destroys this connection by adding “not down the aisle but always up the stairs.” This movement shifts love away from being equated with marriage in favor of love being equated with sex.

See Also: Hair, Jacqueline, Love, Scripts, Exes

SIMULATION

Physical contact between Louise and the narrator is often simulated. The narrator does not imagine touching Louise directly, s/he imagines touching Louise through something else. Oftentimes, the medium between Louise and the narrator is food:

The potatoes, the celery, the tomatoes, all had been under her hands.

When I ate my own soup I strained to taste her skin. She had been here, there must be something of her left. I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic. I knew that she spat in the frying pan to determine the readiness of the oil. It's an old trick, every chef does it, or did. And so I knew when I asked her what was in the soup that she had deleted the essential ingredient. I will taste you if only through your cooking. (36-37)

To say "she had been here, there must be something of her left" is typical of the narrator's feelings toward Louise's body. The narrator understands Louise's body as something that is not there and something that can only be felt through traces. Furthermore, the narrator sees her body as something to be consumed. S/he will experience Louise, but only through traces and simulation.

In this way, the narrator sees Louise's body as expendable and malleable. It can even be argued that there are times that for the narrator, Louise's body is optional. This is because the narrator does not require Louise's body to be there: the narrator is dependent on traces and simulations of Louise's body, which are always communicated

in idealized terms. The idealized Louise that the narrator wants to touch and consume can only exist outside of Louise's body.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Body, Closer, Ghost, Hair, Herself, Kill, Lose,
Loss, Obscure, Possession, Presence,

STORY

The novel, as it is the narrator's recollection of his/her relationship with Louise, would seem that it is a record of the narrator writing Louise's story – in Barthes' terms, it would seem that the novel is the lover writing the other's story. Louise's appearance at the end would thus mean that the other is writing the end of the story.

But Louise is the impetus behind the story. The narrator's actions are all predicated on Louise. Although the narrator writes Louise out of their story, she is still very much present. Ultimately, the narrator tells his/her own story, and within that story, Louise's story emerges. The narrator's love for Louise is what wrote the story in the novel. From this perspective, Louise is writing the narrator's story just as much as the narrator wrote Louise's.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Control, Ending, Herself, Narrator, Presence, Rewrite, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write, Zoo

STORYTELLING

Finding a new way of writing about Louise is the narrator's attempt to understand her disease and so gain control over it. Once the narrator controls the disease, the narrator controls his/her perception of Louise's body. Mitchell writes that "the very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and thus the language of a story seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line. In this sense, stories compensate for an unknown or unnatural deviance that begs for an explanation" (20). Louise's diseased body prevents the narrator from telling the type of story that s/he is accustomed to telling. Since Louise was never healthy, the narrator cannot tell stories of remembrance. Because the narrator seeks an imaginary version of Louise, the discourse of bereavement is obstructive since the narrator is not seeking to regain any semblance of Louise's diseased body. The narrator turns to language to guide him/her into creating a discourse that brings the narrator closer to the idealized image of Louise:

The next day I cycled to the library but instead of going to the Russian section as I had intended I went to the medical books. I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen,

her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away. (111)

This turn to language simulates the turn to both forms of storytelling that had failed the narrator in the past. The narrator finds a presence to “drown” him/herself in, allowing him/her to create and maintain the imaginary Louise that s/he wants. Within the representation of the body – the “sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating” body – the narrator can separate him/herself from Louise’s dying body through the fantasy of remembering a body that is not real. The narrator wants Louise’s body separate from his/her image of her: s/he wants a version of Louise’s body that will remain long after it succumbs to the disease. In this way, the narrator is able to tell a story of Louise’s sick body in those very terms; only then may the image of Louise’s healthy body emerge. Lose,

See Also: Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator, Obscure, Presence, Protection, Rewrite, Scripts, T-Cells, Unwritten, Void, Write, Exes, You, Zoo

T-CELLS³

What the narrator finds most tragic about Louise's cancer can be traced back to the way that the disease was originally explained to him/her. The narrator is told that "cancer is an unpredictable condition. It is the body turning upon itself" (105). The unpredictability of the disease calls into question the infallibility of the rules that the narrator believes the body abides by. Thus the narrator perceives Louise's cancer as her body betraying not only herself, but the narrator as well. To cope with Louise's disease, the narrator attempts to impose structure onto it. If s/he can explain it, then s/he can understand it:

In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit. They don't obey the rules...They were her immunity, her certainty against infection. Now they are the enemies on the inside.

The security forces have rebelled. Louise is the victim of a coup" (115).

Since the narrator understands the body as a system governed by rules, the narrator believes that the cancer that has taken over Louise's body is a coup. As a result, Louise is dying, her body succumbing to itself. The narrator depends on rules and scripts to live by, and when s/he sees these rules or messages ignored or destroyed, the narrator feels lost: "Where am I? There is nothing here I recognize. This isn't the world I

³ The novel, published in 1992 at the height of the AIDS crisis, reverberates with the attack on T-cells in HIV.

know...where is the familiar ballast of my life?" (101). The body that the narrator had become enamored with is turning against Louise and the narrator by threatening to take Louise's body from them both.

Once the narrator begins to learn more about cancer, s/he imagines trying to provide for Louise's body what it cannot provide for itself. After leaving Louise, the narrator becomes obsessed with anatomy and begins researching cancer. In doing so, the narrator reduces Louise to the language of anatomy and disease, limiting his/her writing about Louise to these terms. Written in these terms, the narrator is able to provide the protection that Louise's body has lost:

Will you let me crawl inside you, stand guard over you, trap them as they come at you? Why can't I dam their blind tide that filthies your blood?...The white cells, B and T types, just a few of them as always whistling as they go. The faithful body has made a mistake...You're the foreign body now. (115-16)

What Louise's body has lost is protection, but by representing it through writing, the narrator is able to indulge in his/her fantasy of Louise's healthy body and be a part of the protection that Louise's body needs. In other words, language allows the narrator to provide protection for Louise's body. Mitchell writes that "if the body is the other of the text, then textual representation seeks access to that which is most outside its ability to grasp" (29). The narrator's textual representation of Louise is attempting to grasp what Louise's body cannot do on its own: regain health.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Body, Control, Ending, Fidelity,
Figuration, Ghost, Gone, Hair, Health, Lose, Loss, Mastery,
Narrator, Obscure, Possession, Protection, Rewrite, Story,
Storytelling, Write

UNWRITTEN

Writing that the ending belongs to the other, Barthes suggests that for the lover, the ending is unwritten and waiting to be filled in by the other. This is certainly true for the narrator, who “never knew what [Louise] would do next” (91). Once Louise departs from the accustomed scripts, the narrator loses control. Winterson’s perspective on this argument is best illustrated when the narrator attempts to write Louise into a new script, one that s/he has control of. When Louise’s cancer is revealed, the narrator literally attempts to write the end of the story. Faced with the choice between leaving Louise and guaranteeing her a chance to fight the cancer, or staying with Louise and taking away that chance, the narrator leaves Louise despite Louise’s decision to stay with the narrator. The narrator’s decision can be read as an attempt to regain control of the love story and write what was supposed to be unwritten. If what Barthes writes is true, then the story in the novel is Louise’s: *she* is writing the end of the narrator’s story, thus placing the narrator in the position of the other.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Control, Ending, Figuration, Gone,

Jacqueline, Lose, Mastery, Narrator, Rewrite, Scripts, Story,

Storytelling, Write, You

VOID

“When I turn in the night the bed is continent-broad. There is endless white space where you won’t be” (111).

The story that the narrator tells about Louise quickly becomes ineffective because these stories depend on the narrator to ignore Louise’s physical absence. The narrator’s story is framed around physical absence. “In bereavement books they tell you to sleep with a pillow pulled down beside you...’The pillow will comfort you in the long unbroken hours. If you sleep you will unconsciously benefit from its presence. If you wake the bed will seem less large and lonely’ ” (110). This story provides the physicality that the narrator desires, but it is still unsatisfactory: “I don’t want a pillow I want your moving breathing flesh. I want you to hold my hand in the dark, I want to roll on to you and push myself into you” (110). The narrator is seeking to fill a void that s/he feels in response to Louise’s physical absence. This void cannot be filled by the simulated physicality that the bereavement books offer because the void that s/he feels is with his/her whole body:

The worms that will eat you are first eating me. You won’t feel the blunt head burrowing into your collapsing tissue. You won’t know the blind persistence that mocks sinew, muscle, cartilage, until it finds bone. Until the bone itself gives way. A dog on the street could gnaw on me, so little of substance have I become. (180)

The impending death of Louise creates a void that the narrator can feel with his/her body. As the corporeal body is gone, the narrator turns to bereavement books to help him/her find a way to convince his/her body that the void does not exist. Yet the void is the narrator's body itself: in losing Louise, the narrator has lost him/herself: "She was my twin and I lost her. I lost myself" (163). Since the body that the narrator desires is dying, the narrator feels that s/he is dying as well. Thus the narrator cannot fill the void because the void is the narrator itself.

See Also: Absence, Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Body, Death, Fails, Lose, Loss, Narrator, Possession, Presence, Rewrite, Scripts, Story, Storytelling

WRITE

The narrator writes because of the connection that s/he sees with writing and the body. Remembering a past lover, the narrator reflects on the love letters that s/he wrote: “When we were over, I wanted my letters back. My copyright she said but her property. She had said the same about my body” (17). The narrator is pointing to a relationship that a former lover made between the letters that s/he wrote and the physical relationship they were in. The narrator recognizes this connection, seeing that although s/he created the letters, they belonged to the lover. The narrator is suggesting that the body is something constructed by the self for the lover. In other words, this connection between writing and the body is illustrative of how the body becomes the story that is told about it, and how that story is capable of changing, depending on who is looking at it. This becomes the impetus for the narrator’s decision to write about Louise. Celia Shiffer writes that “to make the past living and to recover loss, the narrator constructs a story in which the body is central, literally reshaping his or her and the lover’s body as their bodies shape the body of the text” (41). The narrator wants to write a story about Louise, but as it progresses, the story becomes less about Louise and more about Louise’s body. In doing so, the narrator refuses to tell the story about Louise’s body in terms of love, and tells the story in terms of disease. Simply put, the narrator writes disease, not love, onto Louise’s body, making her body the property of the narrator.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Body, Ending, Figuration, Hair,

Inadequate, Kill, Lose, Loss, Mastery, Melancholy, Narrator,

Obscure, Possession, Presence, Protection, Rewrite, Scripts, Story,
Storytelling, T-Cells, Exes, You

EXES

The narrator frames romance, love, and sex around memories of his/her past lovers. By way of demonstration, the narrator provides an anecdote. Bathsheba is the first former lover to be introduced, who was a married woman and forbade the narrator to let anyone know about their affair. The narrator describes this relationship was a “world of double meanings and masonic signs” (16) to demonstrate his/her opinion on marriage: “Odd that marriage, a public display and free to all, gives way to that most secret of liaisons, an adulterous affair” (16). This introduction of Bathsheba comes almost immediately after the narrator reveals that Louise is a married woman, and that because of this, she will leave the narrator, just as Bathsheba did. This introduction of Bathsheba not only operates as a way to illustrate how the narrator’s experiences shape his/her opinion on love, but it also serves as a way for the narrator to reveal his/her reliance on scripts. Immediately preceding the description of the affair with Bathsheba, the narrator describes what can be expected from a relationship with a married woman, via a script between a married woman and her lover. The narrator then goes into a description of Bathsheba as a way to represent how the scripts are always reliable.

The appearance of each ex-lover operates in the same way, both revealing the narrator’s experience and the scripts that the narrator has learned to follow. It is interesting to note that the only ex-lovers that the narrator mentions are the only ones that Louise knows: “Inge, Catherine, Bathsheba, Jacqueline. Others of whom Louise knew nothing” (69). To this point in the novel, these four lovers are the only ones that

have been introduced thus far in the novel. What makes this significant is that although the narrator appears to be writing the novel *about* Louise, the narrator is writing as if the reader is in the position of Louise. This suggests that the narrator wants Louise as both a character in a story s/he is writing, and the reader of the same story.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Ghost, Inadequate, Jacqueline, Love, Narrator,
Scripts, Sex, Storytelling, Write, You

YOU

The narrator writes each experience with a lover as a story that has already been told; this tendency is most evident in the use of the second person, which the reader is first lead to associate with Louise and later learns to connect to any one in a series of lovers. Before introducing any specific characters, the narrator begins using the words “you” and “we” almost immediately into the novel, giving the impression that the novel is written to someone and that the reader is not “you.” For example, the narrator writes “August. We were arguing. You want love to be like this every day don’t you?” (12). The use of the words “you” and “we” demonstrate that what the narrator is writing is a memoir to someone, not about someone. The narrator’s audience is established here as someone who is familiar with and shares romantic memories with the narrator. That the narrator is speaking to only one person is best demonstrated when the narrator writes about his/her past relationships. The narrator describes moments with a past lover the same way s/he does in the opening of the novel, but names each lover, as opposed to just referring to each as “you.” There is a distinction between the “you” in the opening of the novel and all others who may share similar memories with the narrator.

This is challenged, however, when the narrator recalls dialogue between him/herself and the “you” that s/he is writing to. For example:

‘Why bother?’ I said. ‘He only had one eye.’

‘I’ve got two,’ she said and kissed me. (...)

You didn’t answer. (12)

The narrator feels that in order to understand Louise s/he must treat her as if she were part of a text. For the narrator, Louise must be written in order to be represented, and the reflective moments where she is just “you” is, in the narrator’s mind, insufficient. The narrator moves from referring to the lover – Louise – as “she” (in a narrative mode that follows pre-arranged scripts, lovers’ discourse) and then “you” (in the intimate language the narrator ultimately finds insufficient). The narrator is attempting to put his/her experiences with Louise into a recognizable form – in this case, fiction – to convey what s/he wants to remember about that experience. The narrator has thus already put Louise in the position of a character in a story and has fictionalized her presence.

Acknowledging this, the narrator later writes that “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator” (24). This represents a shift in the narrative, wherein Louise is distanced from the story. Louise is no longer complicit in the storytelling, as she was when she was only referred to as “you” and spoken to as if part of a mutual remembrance, but she is now only a part of the story that the narrator is telling. When Louise is formally introduced, she is fictionalized and described in the third person: “And then I met Louise” (28). Louise becomes another character in the narrator’s story in the moments where the narrator is telling a story. When the narrator’s story breaks, however, and it becomes a reflection of Louise, the narrator once again acknowledges Louise as “you” until s/he begins writing the narrative again.

See Also: Anamorphic, Before, Beginning, Figuration, Herself, Mastery,

Narrator, Possession, Presence, Rewrite, Storytelling, Write

ZOO

After leaving Louise, the narrator comes to see him/herself as a victim, separated from Louise without a choice. The narrator emphasizes this by comparing him/herself with animals in the zoo:

I call Louise from the doorstep because I know she can't hear me.

Animals in the zoo do the same, hoping that another of their kind will call back. The zoo at night is the saddest place. Behind the bars, at rest from vivisectioning eyes, the animals cry out, species separated from one another, knowing instinctively the map of belonging. They would choose predator and prey against this outlandish safety...they prick their ears till their ears are sharp points but the noises they seek are too far away. I wish I could hear your voice again." (135)

The narrator's choice to align him/herself with animals in the zoo is illustrative of how s/he feels trapped by what is expected and what is needed. Drawing similarities between him/herself and the animals calling out, the narrator attempts to convince him/herself that s/he is making a true effort to contact Louise. The narrator, like the animals, instinctively knows that the "protected" place s/he is in is not where s/he belongs. Describing how the noises that the animals are trying to hear are too far away, the narrator is further establishing him/herself as a victim: the narrator is framing this comparison in such a way to establish him/herself as one without a choice. Closing the

comparison with the line “I wish I could hear your voice again” emphasizes the position of victim that s/he believes to be in.

See Also: Anamorphic, Gone, Inadequate, Mastery, Narrator, Presence, Rewrite,
Scripts, Story, Storytelling

CONCLUSION

The notion of anamorphism – seeing things only under certain lights – is central to the argument this thesis makes about bodies, and by extension, Winterson's *Written on the Body*. The collapse of the boundaries between these discourses allow a different perspective to emerge, one that illustrates the dissolved boundaries between absence and presence, health and disease, body and language. The illusions of power that drive the narrator to recreate Louise to fit his/her image of her also dissolve once the reader steps out of the perspective of the narrator. Looking in the shadows of the narrator's memories, *Written on the Body* emerges as not only an account of the narrator's love story, but also an account of Louise's story, a story of a body that refuses to be written on and demands to be heard. Presenting Louise's body as a space taken over by the narrator's language, Winterson demonstrates how the body is always in the process of creating knowledge and meaning, a knowledge and meaning that can only be obtained by questioning what is normal, both for the body and for the scripts we all adhere to.

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